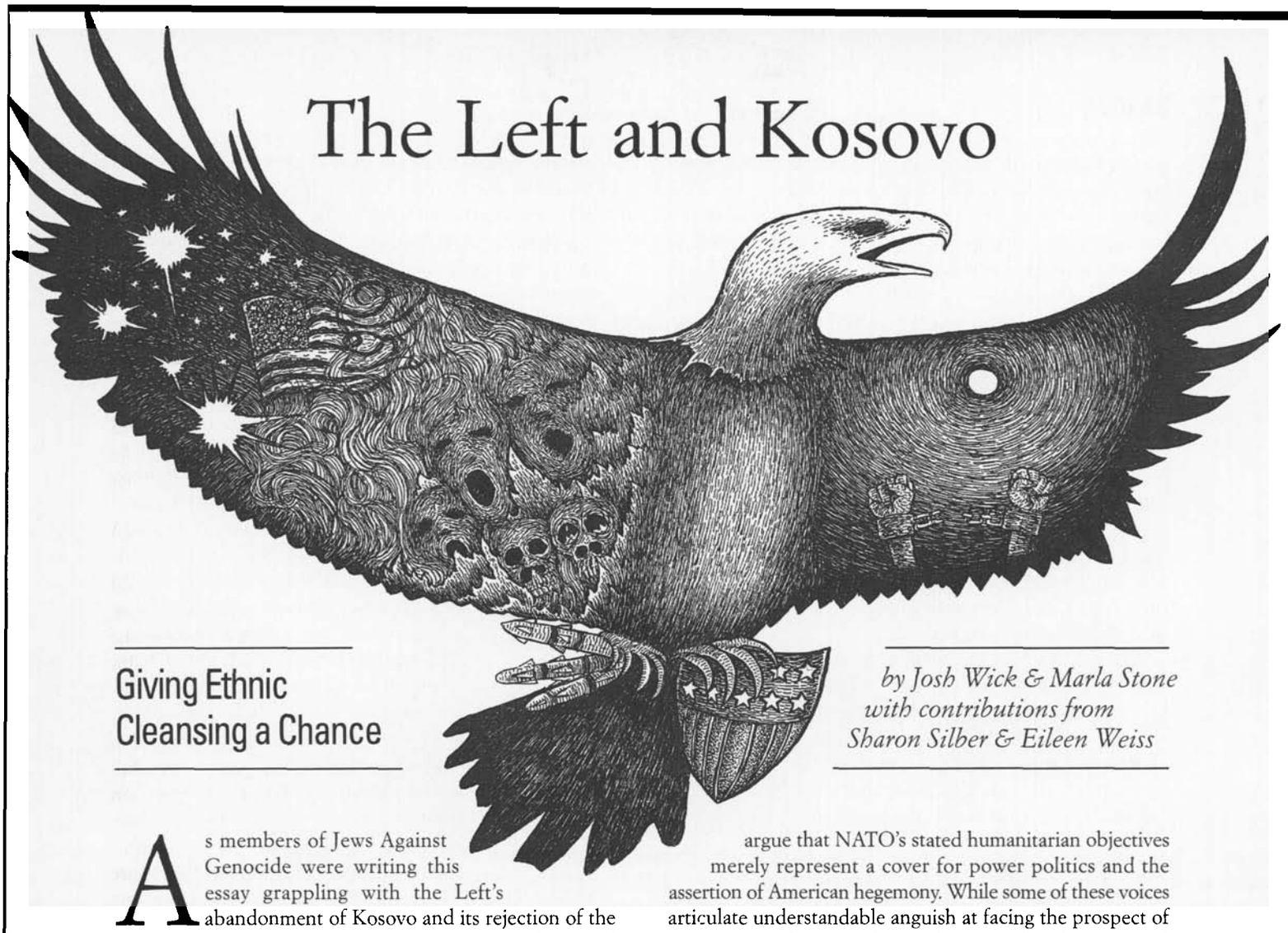
The Left and Kosovo



Giving Ethnic Cleansing a Chance

by Josh Wick & Marla Stone
with contributions from
Sharon Silber & Eileen Weiss

As members of Jews Against Genocide were writing this essay grappling with the Left's abandonment of Kosovo and its rejection of the NATO war against Yugoslavia, a concerned and isolated leftist sent the following note:

> I just left a panel on Kosovo. The analysis was the standard "U.S. imperialism is to blame for everything; we shouldn't demonize the Serbs; the KLA are no better; it is all about getting oil from the Caspian, etc." I am so discouraged. Why do people on the Left want to gloss over the fact that Albanians are getting raped and murdered? I wish people would understand that Kosovo is not Vietnam. It really depresses me that people can't see that Milosevic is a fascist and must be stopped. If the KKK were to take over this country and begin a campaign to murder people of color, I would sure want foreign countries to come rescue me. As someone who considers himself a leftist, I am saddened when leftists mindlessly act as apologists for rapists and murderers.

The NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia has unleashed a torrent of criticism from the American left, who argue that NATO's stated humanitarian objectives merely represent a cover for power politics and the assertion of American hegemony. While some of these voices articulate understandable anguish at facing the prospect of using military force to achieve a human rights objective, and some of the objections are understandable in light of the way that U.S. military power has far too frequently been used to advance the interests of American corporations and the military rather than the highest ideals of American democracy, this time the Left has drawn the wrong conclusions and ended up on the wrong side. *The Nation* and Pacifica radio have lost their moral compass, portraying this struggle as though their writers had no knowledge of who has been victim and who has been victimizer for the past decade. Left-inspired "teach-ins" disseminating information from Ramsey Clark or from the International Action Center often present an uncritical apologia for Serbian policy (or, at best, a passing acknowledgment of Serbian crimes) and insist that the current intervention is just another instance of America's imperial arrogance.

These voices could not be more wrong on the substance of the issues. Rather than a knee-jerk rejection of Western military action, critics on the Left should be finding common cause with the victims whose suffering demands action. Here, finally, is a case in which U.S. and NATO foreign policy is shaped not only by self-interest but by moral considerations—which is precisely why it took NATO so long to get involved, why it tried negotiations rather than

Josh Wick, a recent graduate of NYU's film school, is an independent filmmaker living in Brooklyn, New York. Sharon Silber is a psychologist and professor of psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Marla Stone is associate professor of history at Occidental College. Eileen Weiss works in the theater. Silber, Stone, and Weiss are co-founders of Jews Against Genocide.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAC McGILL

confrontation for so many years. Because the moral/humanitarian purposes of this intervention are so great, we on the Left must support forces which we are uncomfortable and unused to supporting. But by encouraging Milosevic to believe that NATO might eventually be paralyzed by a lack of will and unity, the international left contributed to Milosevic's fantasy that he could outlast the bombings and continue the worst atrocities in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

The most commonly heard arguments against the NATO war have been steeped in misinformation. First, decriers of the intervention often have suggested or assumed that the conflict between Milosevic and the Kosovars began on March 24, 1999, and that it was the NATO air strikes that caused the depopulation of Kosovo. In fact, the war against the Kosovar Albanians began ten years ago, and the air strikes only gave Milosevic the cover of war in which to complete his program of Serbianizing Kosovo.

What happened to a Left that championed human rights and unequivocally opposed fascist forces around the world?

Second, critics of the NATO intervention have argued that this is a civil war unworthy of international involvement. This argument rejects the notion that the violence in Kosovo constitutes genocide.

In Article II of the UN Convention on Genocide of 1948, genocide is defined as: "intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group [by]: Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." Prior to the Serb campaign, there were 1.8 million ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Of those, as many as 100,000 may have been murdered in Milosevic's latest purge. The UN estimates that in the first seven weeks of the Serbian offensive, more than 700,000 deportees, almost half of Kosovo's Albanian population, fled the province. Many report having faced Serbian forces or police coming to their homes and giving them a few minutes to leave, their possessions confiscated, their homes often put to the torch, those refusing to cooperate shot on the spot.

Since the beginning of the Serb offensive, the sheer volume, consistency, and shared detail of accounts of atrocities by deportees suggest to human rights groups that they are credible. The Balkan Action Council, from interviews with deportees, documented a Serb mass killing of some one hundred to two hundred men on the roadside near Djakovica. Deportees have given Human Rights Watch reports of a massacre of one to three hundred men (between the ages of sixteen and sixty) whom Serb forces took out of a convoy of refugees and shot near the village of Meja. Accounts given to the International Crisis Group (ICG) document one mass killing in which Serb forces reportedly locked up the entire male population of a village in a building and then set it aflame. The list goes on and the reports continue to multiply.

Human rights organizations have reported evidence gathered from Albanian refugees of mass executions in at least seventy towns and villages in Kosovo since large-scale deportations began in late March. They also report that three hundred villages have been burned to the ground.

The Kosovo Verification Mission of the fifty-four-nation OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), which has interviewed six hundred refugees, found that mass executions were taking place in Kosovo, along with evidence of "rape on a wide scale" and other atrocities. Accounts of systematic killings are also substantiated by satellite photos released by the U.S. State Department of mass graves in the towns of Pusto Selo and Izbica, as well as five other sites. These are similar to photographs of mass burials in Bosnia after the Serb genocidal aggression there. Reports of mass murder in Izbica have been substantiated by clandestine videotaped footage. At the time we go to press, fresh accounts of systematic rapes are being documented.

The deportees largely consisted of women, children, and old men. Even as Kosovars return to their homes, it may take considerable time to learn the fate of many missing Albanian men (some as young as fourteen) who may have been tortured or murdered by Serbian troops. We have good reason to worry about their fate.

These reports and Milosevic's tactics suggest that the "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo has been an orchestrated campaign by the Yugoslav government to commit genocide against the Kosovar Albanians. For instance, the militia leaders under Milosevic are the same leaders indicted by the UN Tribunal in The Hague for war crimes in Bosnia. The notorious Arkan, for example, whom The Hague indicted in September 1997, was operating his paramilitary forces, known as the Tigers, in Kosovo. The Tigers, accused of some of the most vicious rampages of killing, looting, and raping in Muslim villages in Croatia and Bosnia, have worked closely with the Serb police and paramilitary. In one incident, they are alleged to have killed hundreds of Muslim men they had locked up in a sports center in Bosnia. There are reports that Arkan, with Milosevic's blessing, recruited convicts from prisons in Serbia to join him in the pogroms in Kosovo.

It is true that the crimes of Milosevic are unlikely to reach the magnitude of those committed during the Holocaust. But the Left called the American assault on the people of Vietnam "genocidal" when the damage the United States inflicted was far less than total extermination. Does only the commitment to complete extermination warrant inter-

national intervention? If we are to learn from the Holocaust, the primary lesson ought to be intervention while people are still alive.

Another component of the argument against the NATO intervention focuses upon the destruction caused by NATO air strikes. In this line of reasoning, the NATO bombing is equated to the expulsions, murders, and rapes committed by Serb police and paramilitary in Kosovo. How can planned depopulation and destruction be compared to a bombing campaign whose goal is destruction of the Serb military capacity? It takes a cynical sleight of hand to produce such an equivalency.

The decriers of NATO intervention have stressed the difficult conditions in Serbia as a result of the NATO bombing. We have reports of Serb civilians sitting in the dark and lining up for water. But where were the similar cries of outrage for the past nine years when the victims of Milosevic's wars spent much of the 1990s in similar or worse conditions? No one wants to see innocent civilians suffering. Yet it may be that a lack of electricity and water might push some Serb citizens to rethink the cost of having Slobodan Milosevic as president, a rethinking they were unwilling to do when it was "merely" world opinion and UN declarations that confronted them. Here, again, it is the lack of balance and the obliteration of the historical context that makes us wonder what has happened to a Left that once championed human rights and unequivocally opposed fascist forces around the world.

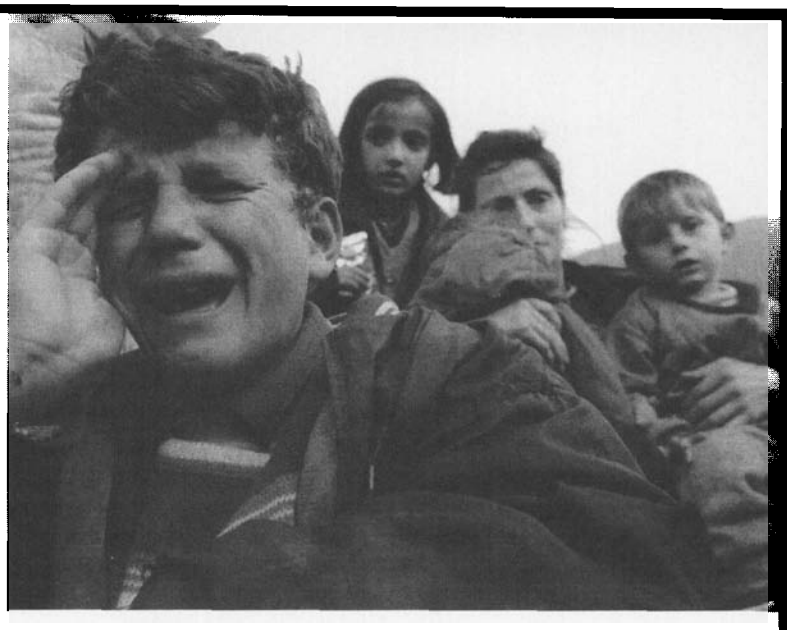
Certainly the Left's distaste for American exploits abroad has solid foundation in the history of the past several decades. But, intelligent and moral people must look at the Kosovo war on its own terms: it is not Vietnam and it is not Central America. If its "teach-ins" would move beyond a ritual recounting of the distortions in past American policy, the Left might begin to look at Kosovo in historical context. What the Left badly needs is a brief review of the facts of the case.

Kosovo: A History

In the opening days of the NATO strikes, there was talk on the Left that the killings in Kosovo and the mass exodus were as much a result of the bombings as they were a result of Serb forces. Why had we rushed to use force—why not negotiate?

The fact is that Serb forces, in the year prior to the NATO action, had been steadily escalating the magnitude of their atrocities against Kosovar Albanian civilians. Far from rushing to intervene against Serbian aggressions, NATO and the United States have spent eight years in negotiations, appeasing Milosevic in the hope of avoiding a military confrontation.

Serbian nationalists have long sought a "final solution" to the problem of Muslims in the Balkans. An outline for a "final solution" of the Kosovo Albanians had been discussed as early as 1937, in a paper titled "The Expulsion of the Albanians" by Serbian nationalist V. Cubrilovic. This "solution" was given intellectual benediction by a memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences in the late 1980s, which called for the ethnic purification of Serbia. Milosevic rose to power in 1989 by promising to restore the Serbian hold over Kosovo.



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In 1989, following through on his campaign promises, Milosevic revoked Kosovo's autonomy. A lengthy period of brutal oppression against ethnic Albanian civilians followed. Albanians were dismissed from their jobs, had their cultural institutions banned and destroyed, had their leaders imprisoned, and were effectively cut off from all civic institutions, professions, and university life. In other circumstances, this would have been enough to mobilize the worldwide Left into action against oppression.

Government security forces began to organize attacks on Albanian civilians, particularly those with any political or professional status. Human Rights Watch (HRW), in a report in 1993, documented massive human rights violations in Kosovo and included, on its cover, a picture of a Kosovar Albanian man who had had a Serb cross carved into his chest by police forces in Kosovo. More recently, the Serbs have also used food as a weapon in ejecting Albanians from Kosovo. In an October 1998 report, HRW documented that Serb forces in Kosovo had systematically destroyed food stocks, burned down silos and haystacks, and killed livestock, so that by the end of that year Kosovo was dependent on food assistance from international aid organizations.

Since 1991, in reaction to Milosevic's predations, the West has brokered eleven cease-fires with him, all of which he has violated. As early as December 1992, President Bush warned President Milosevic that the United States was prepared to take unilateral military action if the Serbs sparked a conflict in Kosovo. President Clinton repeated the warning only weeks after his inauguration. Usually, Milosevic could ignore the warnings by performing his usual dance: agreeing to the demands, then violating whatever he had agreed to.

In 1995, when NATO finally did intervene in Bosnia, it was three years into the war, after almost a quarter million people were killed, and after the Serbs had wiped out two of the UN "safe havens" established to protect fleeing Muslim civilians. The Clinton administration, unwilling to commit ground troops to intervene against Milosevic, had consistently quieted attempts to indict him as a war criminal in order to pursue negotiated settlements to his wars in the Balkans. This inconsistency on the part of the United States was motivated by a sense that the U.S. had no economic or military interests in the region (as one member of the governing elite put it, "We have no dog in that fight"); the major pressure to intervene was ethical, and most NATO leaders felt that they could ignore more pressure. So what if a few Jews, remembering our own Holocaust, sounded off about all this—most people seemed not to care that much, and for that reason the Clinton administration could see that the easiest way out was to try to make accommodations with Milosevic, unwilling to acknowledge quite how determined he has been to achieve full "ethnic purity" for a "Greater Serbia."

By the early months of 1998, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), reacting to the increase of attacks on ethnic Albanian civilians, began sporadic guerrilla actions against Yugoslav security forces. In response, Milosevic used the growth of the KLA as a rationale for increasing the brutality of his attacks on Kosovar Albanian civilians. The defenders of the Muslims were termed "terrorists" and Milosevic expected that the West would remain passive if he could convince them he was merely involved in a war against terrorists. As early as February 1998, more than a year before the NATO bombing, Yugoslav government forces massacred civilians in the Drenica region of central Kosovo (a stronghold of the KLA), as HRW documented in its October 1998 report. In the attack, Yugoslav Special Forces reportedly used artillery, helicopters, and armored vehicles to kill at least eighty-three people, twenty-four of whom were women and children.

The police attack was a turning point for many of the ethnic Albanians who had once been committed to the nonviolent politics of Ibrahim Rugova. Early in the summer of 1998, the KLA freed an estimated 40 percent of the country from Milosevic's regime. At the same time, however, Yugoslav forces were attacking a swath of towns along the Albanian border with the specific intent of depopulating the region, according to HRW. Some forty-five thousand people fled as the government forces reportedly shelled civilians and, in at least three cases, fired upon them in helicopters marked with the Red Cross emblem.

Slowly, the outside world began to shake off its paralysis. In June 1998, the Contact Group on the former Yugoslavia (consisting of America, Russia, Italy, France, Britain, and Germany) warned Milosevic that he could not count on the West being as indecisive as it had been in Bosnia. Milosevic promised that the advance had stopped. Yet, it was clear on the ground that government forces had actually intensified their offensive from July through September 1998. By mid-August, the government had recaptured most of the territory held by the KLA. According to Physicians for Human Rights, the Serb summer offensive left hundreds dead; Western aid groups estimated it also produced a quarter-million Albanian refugees within Kosovo, fifty thousand of whom, they warned, were hiding in the woods and in danger of freezing to death from the snows of the coming Balkan winter.

In what was by now a familiar pattern, NATO drew up plans for military action, Milosevic promised concessions, and NATO threats soon languished. As the massacres of Kosovar Albanian civilians continued through the fall, however, the UN Security Council was outraged enough in September 1998 to pass a resolution demanding an immediate end to attacks on civilians by the Yugoslav army. Milosevic simply ignored it. Three days later, two separate massacres of civilians in the Drenica region by Serb forces shocked the world community. The killing of eighteen women, children, and elderly members of the Deliaj family, in the village Obrinje, was particularly horrific. Included among the victims were a ten-year-old boy, his throat slit from his jugular to his lip, a baby girl, and a young woman whose belly was gouged out.

The October Accord

The pattern of Serb atrocities, initial international outrage, swift and fleeting calls for action, followed by a gradual accommodation to Milosevic's continued defiance, is well illustrated by the failure of the October accord.

In the fall of 1998, international pressure to stop the Serbian atrocities was growing. With the UN Security Council, the six-nation Contact Group, and renewed threats of NATO action behind him, U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke met the Serb leader and pushed him to meet some of the concessions laid down by the Security Council. Milosevic agreed to halt his crackdown against the Albanian population and to allow the presence of some two thousand observers from the OSCE to monitor the cease-fire in Kosovo. In return, Milosevic was able to win a concession from the West that he would reduce his forces only to levels prior to the campaign of the summer.

There was little expectation in the West that the accord would last. Milosevic was betting on the fleeting attention of the Clinton administration, embroiled as it was in trying to contain the Lewinsky scandal. After only token reductions of Serb forces, Milosevic stopped his withdrawal. NATO, with no will to carry through on its threat of air strikes, first extended its deadline for withdrawal ten days, and then, predictably, let the deadline slip quietly without consequence.

For the besieged White House, Kosovo was quickly forgotten as President Clinton moved closer to an impeachment

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER DEJONG / AP WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

trial. Milosevic, meanwhile, taking advantage of Washington's distraction, gradually began to build up his forces in Kosovo. By the late fall, Western intelligence officials, particularly the Germans, began to warn of a Serb troop buildup that could be the backbone of a military operation to push hundreds of thousands of Albanians out of Kosovo. Its code name was Potkova—in Serbian, "Horseshoe"—and it alluded to the amassing Serb troops who were positioning themselves to encircle the central Kosovo region of Djakovica, the stronghold of the KLA. According to the International Crisis Group, Operation Horseshoe was devised to leave open escape routes between Serb forces for fleeing deportees who survived the assault. In this way, Milosevic predicted he would direct the flood of refugees into neighboring Macedonia and Albania.

As Milosevic grew bolder, NATO increasingly sought to accommodate his campaign in Kosovo. By the end of 1998, the fighting that had caused the deaths of two thousand people continued unabated. Serbs, meanwhile, were routinely blocking the passage of the unarmed monitors to villages where Serbs were carrying out offenses, and the number of incidents of violence against OSCE monitors by Serb security forces escalated. The tenuous October cease-fire had collapsed.

Meanwhile, as NATO civilian leaders agonized over what steps to take, if any, the massacres of ethnic Albanian civilians mounted. The most dramatic was a killing spree by Serbian forces on January 16 of forty-five Albanians in the village of Racak. Some of the victims, later discovered by OSCE verifiers, were found with their eyes gouged out and their heads caved in—one man was even decapitated. The victims, all dressed in civilian clothes, included a twelve-year-old boy, a young woman, and many elderly men.

Rambouillet

The world community was finally galvanized by the barbarity of the massacre at Racak. Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general, was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying that the threat of force was justified to get the Serbs to the bargaining table. This was the impetus NATO civilian leaders needed—united and determined more than ever to end Kosovo's killings—to back a new accord with a genuine threat of force.

The nations of the Contact Group (which included Russia) drafted a new set of five principles for both sides. They included: the withdrawal of all Serbian forces; the effective return of an autonomous self-government in Kosovo; a referendum in three years to decide final status for the province; the presence of armed NATO troops to verify the accord and protect the Albanians; and the gradual disarming of the KLA.

But Rambouillet proposals were not accepted by the Serbs. By the time the Paris talks fell apart, Serb tanks and troops had already begun to move well into the Drenica region. Serb forces destroyed homes and set villages ablaze.

In the week of Rambouillet's conclusion, six days prior to the NATO strike, the office of the UN high commissioner on refugees estimated that forty thousand people had

fled their homes in Kosovo—twenty thousand of whom had fled in the two days after Rambouillet's collapse. The Serb spring offensive had begun.

As NATO's deadline drew near, OSCE quickly evacuated its monitors and Serb military leaders gave the order to prevent journalists from reaching the Drenica region. In the vacuum left by the absence of the verification team and Western reporters, Serb forces let loose a bloodbath. Serb police attacked the ethnic Albanian suburbs on the southern edge of Pristina. They raided houses, beat people, and smashed cars and windows. The suburbs' five hundred houses were emptied in minutes. By March 21, the village of Prekaz was emptied and burning. Scbica was torched. In the four days leading up to the NATO deadline, the UN high commissioner for refugees estimated a further twenty-five thousand people were forced to flee their homes.

On March 24, after a year of delays and appeasement, the nineteen nations of NATO were finally pushed to launch air strikes in the hope of halting the Serb killing machine in Kosovo.

The Left has rendered itself incapable of imagining a moment in which America could possibly be on the correct side.

The June Accords

As we go to press, the intervention appears to have succeeded in creating conditions which may allow many of the refugees to return to their homes.

However, it is far too early to celebrate the June accords. There has been a long history of Milosevic entering into agreements under pressure, then later reneging when the world's attention shifted elsewhere. Nor does the accord resolve the issue of Kosovar independence, which is vital to ensuring Kosovar Albanian human rights. Though the NATO presence in Kosovo is likely to bring a temporary respite, we doubt that the Balkans will see any lasting peace until Milosevic and his "willing executioners" are removed from power.

Under the sway of a racist and pervasive Serb media, Serbs continue to deny the true horrors of the Serbian campaign in Kosovo. Sonja Biserko, the former head of Helsinki Watch Belgrade and currently in exile in Sweden, has called for an occupation and the "de-Nazification" of Serbia.

Any new Milosevic-inspired atrocities should require a ground war, yet the politics in Western countries have dictated that only the Serb forces, the Kosovo Liberation Army, and the Albanian civilians should shed blood—not anyone from NATO. It may be true that the philosophy of "no casualties" made it possible for Clinton and others to fight the war without much political risk at home. But it has also ensured that the clique around Milosevic, determined to use Serbian nationalism to maintain power, will continue to infect the Serbian population with an ideology which portrays them as innocent victims whose only recourse is genocidal policies against non-Serbians in the Balkans.

A ground force that enters Kosovo as peacekeepers under the arrangement negotiated by the Russians and with Russian troops involved will have no mandate to intervene should Milosevic turn his genocidal attentions to other parts of the Balkans. In Montenegro, a weak government can not long protect Muslim civilians from the quiet amassing of Serb troops loyal to Milosevic. Muslims in Sandzek and Hungarians in Vojvodina—both provinces of Serbia itself—are likely candidates for Milosevic's next mass murder.

The bombing almost certainly cost Milosevic some of his ability to maneuver in the short run. Yet the fundamental pattern may remain in place: Milosevic making concessions to momentarily stop the momentum of the war, only to be followed by renewed attempts at genocidal ethnic cleansing.

And if Milosevic does get a chance to rebuild his apparatus of domestic repression and ethnic assault, it will be in part because of the space and moral legitimacy being given to him by the Left. Locked into a shallow and outdated understanding of American imperialism, unable to distinguish between this war and Vietnam, the Left has rendered itself incapable of imagining a moment in which America could possibly be on the correct side. The international left will continue to portray Serbia as the victim of U.S. aggression, thus strengthening Serbians' ability to refuse responsibility for their own crimes against humanity and to dismiss the Hague indictment against their leaders as merely "propaganda," and giving new energy to the "willing executioners" who may within the next decade be involved in new genocidal attacks.

In the midst of the Left's confusion, it is only the Jewish left, sensitized to these issues by our own experience with the Holocaust, which managed throughout the 1990s to keep its moral compass and remain faithful to the needs of the besieged Muslims of Bosnia and Kosovo. The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Jews Against Genocide, TIKKUN, and other voices of Jewish liberal and progressive life have rejected the Left's anti-interventionist approach. We can only hope the larger Left will follow this lead as new information about Serbian atrocities in Kosovo come to light. ❑